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ABSTRACT

The limited impact of educational research on actual classroom practice is considered. It is pointed out that results of research are generally published in "prestige" journals rather than in publications teachers are likely to read. Further, it is stated that research projects are almost always generated by administrators or program directors and that the research is designed to meet their needs rather than the needs of teachers dealing on a day to day basis with children. Teachers frequently see research as lacking relevance. The incentives motivating researchers are examined and found, in the main, to be less than selfless. Suggestions are made for improving the services of the researchers and in so doing, improving the quality of research itself. (JD)

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INCENTIVES AND BEHAVIORS OF TEACHER EDUCATION RESEARCHERS

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INCENTIVES AND BEHAVIORS OF TEACHER EDUCATION RESEARCHERS

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The impact of efforts of teacher education researchers on America's classrooms has been modest, at best. For years educational journals have despaired over this situation. Not a few critics of higher education have spoken unkind words about increasing dollar commitments to educational research when large numbers of teachers appear to have changed their practices little or not at all despite ever growing stacks of completed research reports.

To draw the case from the general to the more specific, one might well ask the hard question, "What will the impact of this meeting be on educational practioners in the schools?" Even granting the validity of the usual arguments that research takes time, breaking new ground opens blind avenues as well as promising new directions, and other explanations suggesting that "benefits" will accrue later rather than sooner, a cold and dispassionate analysis might well lead to the conclusion that the immediate and the long term consequences of this gathering for teaching will weigh-in somewhat short of revolutionary.

Certainly, however, there will be benefits for the participants. Lines will be added to professional vitae. Perhaps presentations will prompt an exchange of a few letters among the professionals in attendance. A lucky individual or two might have his or her day brightened by a request for a reprint from a colleague or a graduate student at another institution. While these are important benefits, they tend to be benefits that tend to come more clearly as a simple consequence of participation in the professional process than as a result of excellence of substance. The condition of college

and university research today is such that illumination of new ideas and well-crafted research often result in no more professional pay-off for the individual researcher than intellectually shallow conceptions imbedded in flawed design frameworks.

How has this lamentable state of affairs come to be? A number of explanations have been forwarded. A theme that is heard frequently is that college and university professionals exist in an ivory tower from which they look condescendingly down on public school teachers whom they regard as intellectual and social inferiors. Koopman (1977), a strong partisan of this position, suggests that college and university educational researchers have developed a medical model of viewing the world. Koopman believes that the research community among educational specialists in colleges and universities fancy themselves to have a pool of knowledge about which teachers in the "real world" know nothing. Given this conception, the "doctors" of higher education attempt to dispense their understandings to the "intellectually ill and ignorant" in the schools.

Given this view, the reason educational research has had so little impact on teachers' practices is that the teachers resent being patronized. In particular, they are suspicious of the researchers' disinclination to discuss findings in terms that they find relevant to their own situations. Koopman notes a disinclination of researchers to publish in journals a typical teacher might have available in his or her school. In this connection, Koopman says of the university or college professor that

> "One's stature is far greater, one's image far more impressive if one publishes in the Journal of Clinical Psychology or Psychometrika than in a 'cheap' journal such as Instructor, or Learning. This writer has yet to see a copy of the Journal of Clinical Psychology or Psychometrika on a teacher's desk or in a faculty lounge of a public school. Yet such places abound with such periodicals as Instructor, Teacher, Learning." (Koopman, 1977; p. 238.)

Despite the rather astonishing currency of the "arrogant professor" explanation for a lack of "penetration" of educational research findings to the public school classroom, the argument crumbles under serious analysis. Too many educational researchers come from a background of years of classroom experience themselves to want to engage in the sort of self-serving posturing that Koopman (1977) suggests is the norm. Besides, even assuming that there were some social distance between professors and teachers (certainly not a condition that has been clearly demonstrated, at least to my knowledge), most classroom teachers likely would jump to implement anything coming from a researcher that would make them more effective. Finally, the Koopman elucidation of the "class division" argument presupposes a uniformity among personality traits of both professors and classroom teachers that makes for interesting discussion so long as one does not delude himself or herself that it has anything to do with reality. There are pretentious and supercilious professors. But, as importantly, there are professors dedicated to serving the interests of the classroom teacher with a passion that has no use for self-serving puffery.

Indeed, a survey of educational researchers with interests in teacher education would almost surely reveal a heavy majority who strongly want to serve the real and practical interests of the individual who is out on the front line working with youngsters in the public school classroom. Yet, in spite of this kind of commitment, we must not shy away from the lamentable reality that their efforts truly have not had a great impact on teachers' practices. What is at work here is a conflict between "what ought to be" and "what is."

"What ought to be" clearly is a corpus of research findings that (1) has clear and immediate relevance for the work of the classroom teacher and

that (2) has been incorporated into the behavioral repertoires of classroom teachers. "What is" is a corpus of research, frequently on topics of little interest to public school people, that tends to be reported in good gray academic journals or in papers presented at conferences attended by fellow researchers. What accounts for this strange divergence between the good intents of the researchers and the not so good record of performance as measured by impacts on classroom teachers? At bottom, actual as opposed to ideal behavior of educational researchers boils down to a question of incentives. The famed Scottish economists, Adam Smith, spoke to this issue two hundred years ago.

> "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our necessities but their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow citizens." (Adam Smith, 1776.1, p.14.)

What, then, is it that prompts the educational researcher to prepare his research (dinner) for us? And, what kind of research effort is he or she rewarded for producing? And, who, specifically, is requiring that the research be undertaken? Answers to these questions can shed light on why so much research has been produced and why so little seems to have affected the patterns of behavior of classroom teachers.

First of all, how great is the demand for findings of experimental research among public school teachers? One wag, recently suggested that "Everybody is interested in research on education . . . but not much." How often are educational researchers invited by a school district to come in, design a solid empirical study, and share results with the staff? Not often. Indeed, the whole idea of using talented researchers to investigate a problem with a view to examining results as a basis for formulating

policy decisions tends to be foreign to many school districts. In general, many public school people confuse evaluation with research. They institute an untried program, invest resources in the expectation that data will be found that can justify expenditures to sometimes skeptical boards of education.

Even when educational researchers are not heavily encouraged to establish a case administrators can use to support the inclusion of certain programs in the curriculum, the general pattern in many school districts is to involve university and college educational researchers only at the bidding of the administrative staff. There are occasions when the administrative staff wishes research to be done in areas related to classroom teaching practices. But, the perspectives of the administrative staff may be very different from those of the classroom teacher. Thus, the research design, the research questions, and the conclusions may be of little or no interest to the classroom teacher. James Coleman (1976) has pointed out how such research fails to serve the real needs of affected parties, such as classroom teachers:

> "In nearly every case where information relevant to making decisions is obtained, the design execution and publication of the research attends solely to the information needs of the central policy makers, and not to the interests of the affected parties, nor to the interests of those citizens with ultimate authority over or responsibility for those policies." (Coleman, 1976; p. 306).

Coleman, as an example, cites a situation where the U.S. Office of Education attended almost exclusively to an interest of program administrators of the Follow Through program in youngsters reading and arithmetic scores. Researchers prepared designs to get at this information. But, practitioners involved in the program were much more interested in issues such as the impact of the program on learner absenteeism and attitudes of teachers. The design failed to provide information on these issues. Consequently, for many teachers in the program, the research was perceived to lack relevance.

With respect to much school-based research then, the incentives for educational researchers are manipulated by administrators not by classroom teachers. Though many educational researchers would like to address issues more clearly tied to concerns of the classroom teacher, the reality is that contracts for school-based research tend to be prepared by administrative staffs. Certainly not for any ulterior motive, but flowing naturally from their own concerns, research questions tend to be framed more frequently to provide data of interest to administrators than to classroom teachers. The incentive of the researcher is to respond to these concerns. Information with a clear relevance for the classroom teacher under such circumstances is likely to be ancillary to the major thrust of the research effort.

Given the reality that project purse strings tend to be controlled by administrative personnel with vested interests in certain program patterns, educational research that suggests serious departures from present practices is unlikely to receive a warm reception. The human environment of public school administration is one where cosmetic lip service is paid to the idea of research as a basis for productive change but, which, in fact seeks research evidence to support practices and policies that have been instituted on the bases of tradition and unexamined intuition. In this context, research in teacher education fills more of a validation of program function than a generation of new information function. Where the real agenda is to provide empirical support for existing practices, there is little incentive for researchers to become conversant in solidly grounded up-to-date methodologies. Only rarely are they called upon to provide rigorous comparisons among alternatives. When the preferred choice has been pre-identified, researchers have only to do something to demonstrate that that choice is not doing any real harm and, preferably, that it is doing some good.

In a milieu where the demand for "quality" research tends to be as much a trite verbalism as high priority concern, what incentives keep researchers in teacher education at their tasks? Why do they do it? Why are we gathered here today to talk about our findings?

One incentive, of course, is that there is a small audience of professionals who do have an abiding interest in substantive research efforts in the area of teacher education. Peer approbation has been a widely recognized reinforcer of productive activity. Certainly the knowledge that other interested research workers might listen to and comment upon reports of research is an incentive of some importance.

But, perhaps, the most important single incentive for those who engage in teacher education research has little to do with the audience that will be apprised of the findings of research efforts. Regrettably, this incentive is of such a nature as to prompt widespread research activity with little genuine concern for the issue of substantive quality of research efforts. For large numbers of researchers, the single incentive that keeps them going is the knowledge that a record of completed research is essential for tenure and promotion in the academic community.

This incentive tends to reinforce certain kinds of research at the expense of others. Tenure and promotion panels typically are hard pressed for time. Rarely do they take time to read all reports of research cited on curriculum vitae of candidates for tenure and promotion. Frequently, decisions tend to be made on the bases of reactions to impressive titles and numbers of citations listed. Given this counting game, teacher education researchers have little incentive to engage in longitudinal studies. They have a heavy incentive to investigate problems where data can be quickly, analyzed, and reported. While no blanket condemnation can be made of research studies that consume relatively little researcher time, still, in the main, it is fair to suggest that such studies tend to deal with

more trivial issues than studies demanding more sophisticated designs and longer time periods for completion.

The quality of educational research in teacher education also is influenced by researchers' status as members of a bureaucracy in an occupation where positions are threatened by a large number of fully qualified but unemployed professionals. Given this situation, do educational researchers truly have an interest in becoming so adept at their craft that, in the end, some reasonably definitive solutions to long-standing school problems can be found? Perhaps not.

Threatened members of bureaucracies typically engage in behaviors designed to assure their survival. They have a heavy incentive to work hard to increase the demand for their services. Some cynics have suggested that educational researchers have become much more adept at pointing out areas "desperately in need of study" than at developing practical solution to problems faced by teachers in the classroom. For every journal article lamenting the relatively small impact of research on practice, there are probably five suggesting that "more research is needed." The appeal for "more research" would be a good deal more compelling were it to come from classroom teachers than from university and college professionals with vested financial interests in educational research.

At bottom, then, a fundamental problem with research in teacher education today is that existing incentives do little to support researchers interested in substantive studies directed toward real problems of classroom teachers. Few researchers would deny that they would like to have an impact on the schools. But, though there tends to be consensus with regard to what ought to be, that consensus, by itself, cannot transform what ought to be into what is.

If present incentives are not adequate to induce the production of research with clear and obvious relevance to classroom practices, professional researchers in teacher education need to examine ways for altering the existing system of incentives. Perhaps the best way to attack the problem would be to work for a dramatic increase in the demand for reported research among classroom teachers. A large and eager market of classroom teachers willing to test research-based ideas in the schools would quickly begin to distinguish between research efforts having substantive contributions to make to educational practice and those of inferior quality. Competition among researchers for the attention of a significant portion of a large and critical audience of classroom participants would encourage research on the most pressing problems of teachers and would support innovative developments in design and methodology as researchers attempted to generate supportable answers. In short, were there a quantum jump in the real demand among teachers for products of educational research, the quality of that research likely would improve.

Several obstacles stand in the way of increasing this effective teacher demand for educational research. First of all, as noted earlier, school administrators tend to control the kinds of questions asked by researchers in teacher education. Educational researchers need to work for changes which will allow teachers' present levels of demand for research-based information about present problems (a demand level that, admittedly, may be relatively low at the present time) become known when district-based research efforts are being planned. There is a need to go beyond needs of administrative personnel to probe practical concerns of classroom practioners.

Serious as problems associated with t aditional central control of research questions may be, these problems, alone, do not account for a lack of a large and effective demand by teachers for research-based information.

One suspects that, even in the absence of this traditional administrative control of research questions and designs, the level of teacher interest in research-based answers would be modest. On the part of many teachers, what is at work here is a gap of faith.

Given their undergraduate preparation programs and the cultural milieux of the schools where they work, many teachers view teaching as "art" rather than "science." Exposed to a good deal of information about youngsters' "individual differences" and the "unique characteristics" of every teaching situation, many view the teaching act as something that is highly idiosyncratic. They are much more predisposed to acknowledge the differences than the commonalities characterizing the human condition. Large numbers of teachers are highly suspect of statements about human behavior that can be generalized. This view prompts many to doubt that products of educational research have real relevance for their own "unique" teaching situations.

The educational research community, and particularly those who traffic in research on teacher behavior, would do well to intensify efforts to infuse a better understanding of the scientific point of view into the undergraduate experiences of prospective teachers. Processes used by scientists in arriving at conclusions need to be better understood. Even more importantly, the view that human behavior has an important social element about it that, in many instances, can be generalized from situation to situation needs more careful explication in undergraduate preparation programs. Similar understandings ought to be built into inservice programs in a systematic way.

Unless teachers come to generate a <u>real</u> as opposed to a <u>cosmetic</u> demand (Of course we are interested in research. Isn't everybody?) for products of educational research, there will be little incentive to improve the substantive quality of research on teaching. Indeed, the result will be

the continued existence of those other incentives that prompt researchers to produce studies that are large in number, limited in scope, and deficient in quality. If educational researchers with interests in teaching truly wish to have an impact on classroom practices, identification and modification of the nature of incentives encouraging present levels of effort is a professional imperative.

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